

# Palladiana

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## Jefferson Versus Latrobe

### *Reconstructing the Lost Vision*

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Between 1803 and 1809, President Thomas Jefferson and his Surveyor of Public Buildings, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, collaborated with unique synergy and sympathy to complete the construction of the U.S. Capitol. I use the term “collaborated” loosely, for their relationship, in a broad sense, was traditional: an architect working for a client. After 1801, it was Jefferson whose approval and approbation Latrobe needed—both officially and psychically.

At the beginning of Jefferson’s tenure, the inchoate nation was struggling to establish itself. Essentially, it was a unique situation in world history—in which a seat of government was emerging from the landscape at the same time a new form of government was being formed.

Later, when British troops invaded the city of Washington in August 1814, they burned the public buildings, including the Capitol. The Hall of Representatives in the South Wing, which Jefferson had speculated might be the handsomest room in the world, was gutted, and the rich neoclassical interiors that Latrobe had struggled to build for a decade were destroyed. Thus, we have no images, only letters and drawings on which to speculate as to whose vision was more appropriate. I have used these to attempt to reconstruct the Capitol. But first, let’s review the views of the architect and the President.

Upon taking charge of the Capitol’s construction, Latrobe quickly found fault with the works, a concoction of figural rooms that were not organically unified by a structural system and that were shoddily built. A strong proponent in the strength and simplicity of forms

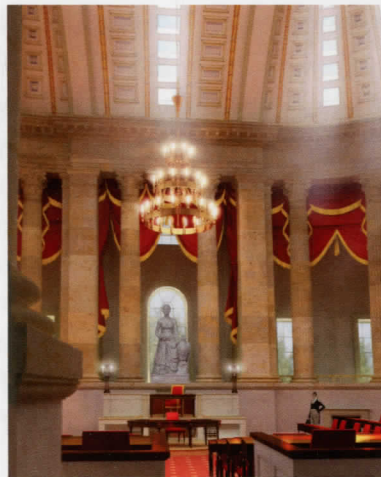
and volumes, and with a reliance on determinate light, Latrobe set about to alter the plans of his predecessors.

Latrobe struggled with his famous client on at least three significant aspects of the design of the South Wing. Despite these conflicts, the 108-foot by 84-foot block of the South Wing began to rise from new foundations based on a set of revisions Latrobe delivered to Jefferson in the spring of 1804. The architect and the client disagreed on how to light the chamber so at this point the roof design was in a state of flux.

Earlier in his career, in August 1786, widower Jefferson had been introduced to Londoners Richard and Maria Cosway. At their initial meeting in the Paris grain market, the Halle aux blés, Jefferson seemed particularly smitten by

Maria, a 26-year-old Italian-English artist.

Over the course of the next six weeks, Jefferson and his new friends engaged in a whirlwind of activities in and around Paris. When the  
Continued on page 12.



View of the chamber  
from the north  
Image by  
Richard Chenoweth

### INSIDE

2 President’s Letter

4 Exploring Palladio in Southern England

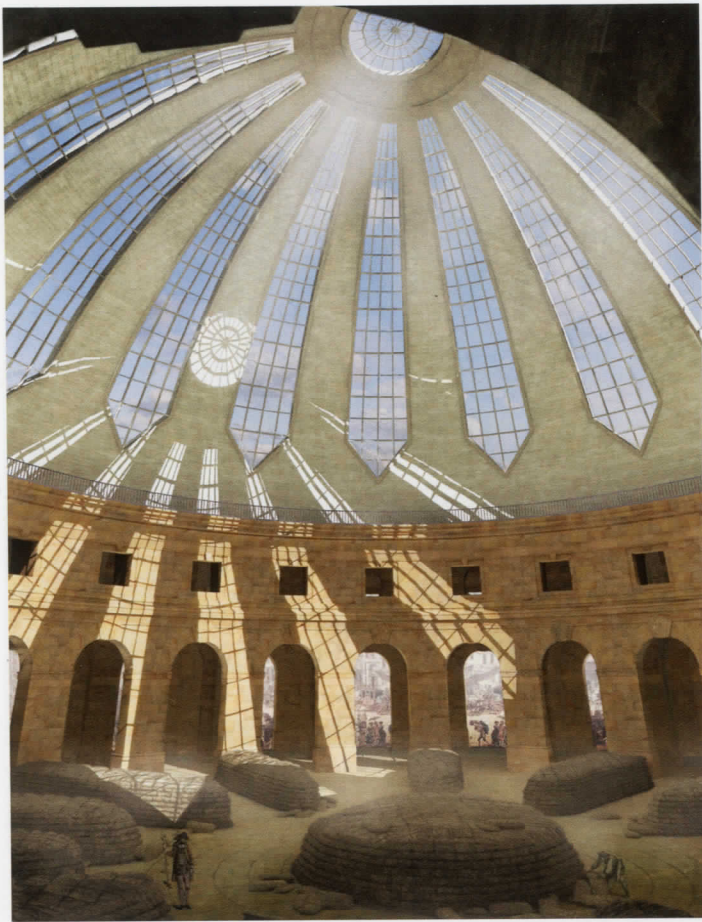
8 The “Four Causes,” Villa Emo

11 Palladianism in Northern England

12 Jefferson Versus Latrobe continued

14 Drawing at Vicenza

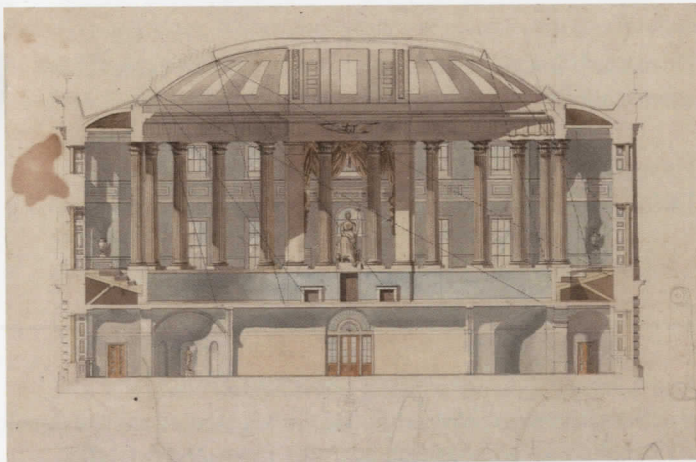




Halle aux blés interior  
Image by Richard Chenoweth



Jefferson inspecting the roof framing of the Capitol in 1806  
Image by Richard Chenoweth



Latrobe's east-west section  
showing the maximum and minimum light angles.  
US Library of Congress

Continued from page 1.

Cosways left for London, Jefferson fell into a seeming depression. It was then he wrote his famous *Head and Heart* letter to Maria in which he describes their first meeting (through the clever dialogue between his rational and emotional minds): "...oh! it was the most superb thing on earth!" Jefferson actually makes two claims at once, however. His head claims the most superb thing on earth is the architecture of the Halle aux blés, while simultaneously his heart claims the most superb thing on earth is her visage.

Clearly both a Romantic vision and a romantic memory were at work in Jefferson's imagination when, in 1804, he asked Latrobe to put a glass roof over the Hall in the South Wing. The ecstatic memory of dazzling light in the Halle aux blés obviously mixed—perhaps inextricably—with the melancholic memory of a young woman most likely he loved. In any case, Jefferson's memory now became Latrobe's mandate.

Latrobe struggled with this charge. How could the fractured light of a granary suit the solemn proceedings of a congress of legislators? One can imagine direct light streaming through patterns of glass and clouds of grain dust, illuminating the bustling interior warehouse floor.



Graciously he contradicted his boss: “So spangled a ceiling, giving an air of the highest gaiety, will I think destroy the solemnity that is appropriate to the object of the edifice.” Over the course of months, Latrobe tried two tactics to bolster his position: He claimed on technical grounds that the Hall would be subject to constant dripping through leakage and condensation, and he claimed that the indirect light from a lantern of vertical glass would be more appropriate for the chamber.

The President was not seduced by either argument. Jefferson wrote to the architect in September 1805, suggesting the final decision was Latrobe’s, but made his own point quite clear: “I cannot express to you the regret I feel on the subject of renouncing the Halle au bless [sic] lights in the Capitol dome. That single circumstance was to constitute the distinguishing merit of the room, & would solely have made it the handsomest room in the world, without a single exception.”

In this standoff between client and architect, it was Latrobe who blinked.

By November 1805, Latrobe had designed a beautiful sheet for a wood-framed roof with one hundred skylights in 20 radial bands. Latrobe, ever hopeful, accommodated for his lantern within the structural framing of the roof—in a sense a knockout plug for later use, just in case the skylights didn’t work out.

In September 1807, the colossal *Sitting Liberty* was unveiled. That same month, upholstery and drapes were ordered. Platforming was built and carpeted. Mahogany desks and chairs were specified, and argand lamps and chandeliers were purchased. Most importantly: the glass roof so desired by the President was in place.

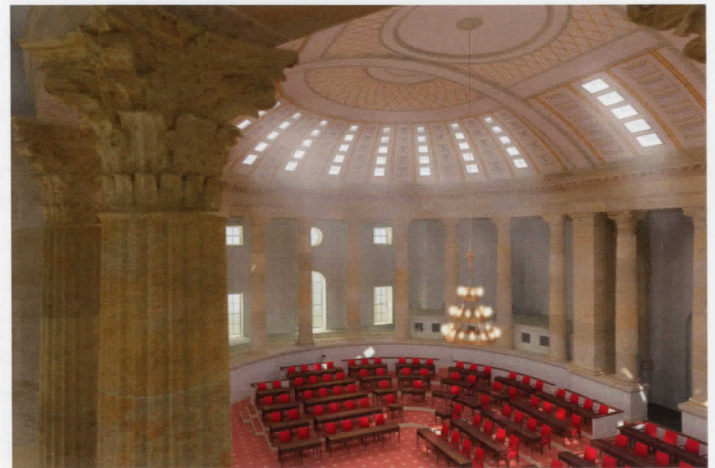
Jefferson had speculated that the chamber would be the handsomest room in the world; yet this chapter of history has been lost to time. For me, this was an opportunity to investigate an architectural history using digital and visual methods. The problems, the solutions, and the conflicts of the story were hyperbolic, visual, deeply-rooted in the psyche, and could not be fully understood through letters and drawings. Jefferson and Latrobe were, in fact, on the same team but the nuances of their differences seemed great.

Using computer modeling, I have brought together every discoverable fact, dimension, detail, and change-order concerning the work. By doing this, I attempted to elucidate a difficult story and allow the viewer to decide the merit of Jefferson’s claim. Even the British officer who was ordered to destroy the chamber, however, is reported to have said, as he stood at the entrance, that “it was a pity to burn anything so beautiful.” ■

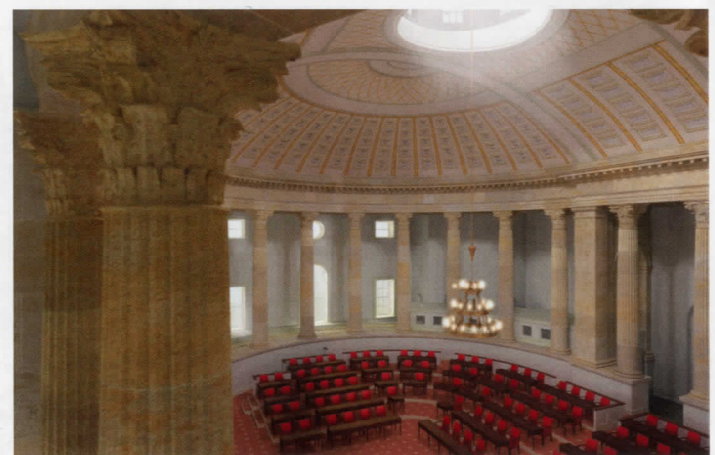
Richard Chenoweth is a Visiting Professor at Mississippi State through 2020, teaching architectural history and a design studio. He has had three fellowships from the U.S. Capitol Historical Society in support of his architectural research on the lost and unbuilt work of Benjamin Henry Latrobe on the Capitol.



View of the US Capitol from the northeast  
Image by Richard Chenoweth



View of chamber with the proposed skylights  
Image by Richard Chenoweth



Alternate design of the chamber with light from the lantern  
Image by Richard Chenoweth





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# Palladiana

CENTER FOR PALLADIAN STUDIES IN AMERICA is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1979 to research and promote understanding of Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio and his influence in the United States. In furtherance of its goals, the Center organizes symposia, lectures, and study tours on Palladian subjects, publishes books and periodicals, sponsors exhibitions, and makes grants to scholars and others.

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## Challenging Times

When we started assembling this issue in February, our country and the world were becoming aware of the coronavirus. Since then, the virus has been declared a worldwide pandemic. Accordingly, CPSA postponed its planned spring Baltimore trip and annual June meeting. We are watching the situation for future activities. We send best wishes for good health for all our members and friends in the US and abroad and hope that our communities and the world will soon be healed.